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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

January 24th, 1945

DEAR MEMBER,

Considerable disappointment was caused in many quarters when the Minister of Education announced that, since it was impossible to do everything at once, the development in adult education which the Education Act makes possible will have to wait until local education authorities have got under way with the work involved in raising the school-leaving age and initiating County Colleges for part-time education.

NEW POSSIBILITIES IN ADULT EDUCATION

The disappointment is not confined to those who have been the pioneers and protagonists of the adult education movement, who are naturally anxious for progress. It is shared by hundreds of men and women working in and with the Forces and in war industries, who have seen a promising crop of educational experiments under war conditions, the fruits of which are bound to be lost if all cultivation stops abruptly at the end of the war.

But there are, or can be, certain advantages in delay. Our ideas about adult education are in a state of change (and of muddle): new conceptions are pushing their way forward, but have not yet proved themselves. We are not ready for a full national scheme involving us in buildings and techniques which may soon be out of date. Educational white elephants are exceedingly difficult to dispose of, witness some of our technical and art schools which look as though they had been transplanted from Macaulay's Calcutta, and are about as well suited to the requirements of modern industry as the pyramids. These are the educational enthusiasms of a past age and now we are more lamentably behind the standards of every other modern industrial country in technical education than in any other branch. What we need at the moment are not a number of half-baked schemes for adult education produced by over-pressed local education authorities, but certain minimum provisions which will insure that experiment goes on and increases. When the lines of advance become clearer and the demand for adult education grows—and it is growing—then we must press for something far more generous, dashing and comprehensive in the way of a national policy for adult education than the timid and economical provision which has hitherto been made.

The gains of the war period in adult education have been of two different kinds: certain general conclusions have been reached and widely accepted, and in the practical field certain experiments have been successfully tried and point the way ahead.

NEW CONCLUSIONS

Among our general conclusions, perhaps the most important is that we realize that there is no such thing as a school leaving age—a point in life at which, be it at 14 or 18 or 80, our education is completed. Sir Richard Livingstone, who has so constantly and cogently expounded a view of education as a commentary upon experience open to the adult in far fuller measure than to the child, has influenced the thought of many people.[1] Practical experience of the high number of illiterates in the Forces and of children who, deprived of schooling for a few months, have forgotten to read has reinforced the contention that the results of nine years' schooling can vanish if they are never used and developed.

We are increasingly realizing the necessity for adult education. At the same time our view of what form it should take is changing. As our educational system improves, and schools are better staffed and equipped, and classes are smaller, we should find fewer of those to whom older forms of adult education were a heaven-sent release from frustration—men and women who ought to have gone to universities or training or technical colleges, but who because they were late starters or poor examinees failed to get through the narrow gate into the secondary school. Thus the aim of adult education must be not to make good to the few what they have missed (though this task must always be performed) but to provide the many, most of whom eschew book learning and think more readily with their hands, with whatever type of education they can most readily assimilate. This drives us to the conclusion either that most people are ineducable, or that education is a great deal broader and more all-inclusive than we were disposed to think. The latter view is triumphing—but against odds. We are a people with educational standards; we make jokes about degrees in typewriting and cheap and easy doctorates. The reverse side of this virtue is that we are frightful educational snobs, with pedestals for the book-learned and indulgent smiles for the rest. It is sad that Christians frequently identify the good with the high-brow, and often fail to lead the way in breaking down educational snobbery.

Our third conclusion (which has largely grown out of the publicity given to the educational value of boys' and girls' clubs by the discussion of the Government's Service of Youth), is that any activity which makes men and women better citizens can rightly be called educational. To such an end lectures and formal teaching are not the most successful means. The chief prerequisite of good

[1] *The Future in Education.* Cambridge University Press, 1941, 3s. 6d.

citizenship is the habit of working with and for one's neighbours. The educational value of joint activities for many purposes is being increasingly realized.

NEW EXPERIMENTS

A description of the adult education which is going on in the Forces and in industry would (and should) fill a book. Technical training, which has given thousands of men and women a new skill, is given by the Forces themselves, other education is in the hands of education officers and voluntary societies. The work of the Central Advisory Council for Adult Education in H.M. Forces [1]—through which universities, local education authorities, and more than a dozen voluntary organizations have co-operated—provides libraries for large camps and isolated gun-sites, lectures, classes in languages, crafts or what you will, and tuition for individuals. Hundreds of men and women have been released to attend longer courses of study. A description of what is called "informal education" was given in the Supplement by Mr. Edwin Barker (C.N-L. No. 213). In the R.A.F., one of the chief features has been the development of News Rooms. Beginning as single huts with a few newspapers, periodicals and chairs, these rooms have in many stations developed into linked series of rooms with lending library, concert and lecture-room, a gramophone record library, and many other educational features. "News Room Clubs" have made themselves responsible for "current events" displays with maps, photographs and papers, for "parliamentary corners" with open and marked copies of Hansard, and skilfully planned exhibits to give prominence to the most important parliamentary events.

At the moment there are no signs that the lavish sowing of these war years is going to be garnered into a harvest. While men and women are in the Services they can get books, tuition, guidance in reading: many of them can take advantage of the work of C.E.M.A. in providing concerts and art exhibitions. Drama groups, music makers' clubs, gramophone record concerts and other cultural activities are to be found in clubs wherever there are considerable numbers of troops in any part of the world. How can they get such things if they come back to the sort of suburb described by Mrs. Keable in this Supplement? The whole onus rests with the individual. Even so simple a thing as keeping official records of the names and home addresses of men and women who have attended educational courses during the war has not been done, and unless they themselves (along with all the preoccupations of finding a house and resettling into a job) take the trouble to seek, nobody can look them up and help them along. This is one urgent practical step which ought to be taken.

[1] A report of the Council's work can be obtained from its offices, Rewley House, Wellington Square, Oxford.

A PLACE FOR MEETING AND DOING

It is in this sort of context that the potentially revolutionary importance of a report published by the Ministry of Education in December can be seen.[1] The committee responsible for the report says that one of the most striking facts which has emerged is "the acute shortage that so frequently exists of suitable premises where people can come together to carry on social, educational and recreative activities." They might have added that it is *a place to read and meet in* which has in the Forces and in munition hostels been discovered to be one of the most necessary prerequisites of adult education.

Community centres are not new: but they now take on new possibilities. Most of those which have hitherto existed have been sponsored by public or voluntary agencies for the less favoured sections of the community—for the unemployed, for county council housing estates, for miners. To these have been added large numbers of recreational centres for transferred workers. One of our readers writes that twenty-three new community centres of one kind and another, with activities ranging from sewing classes and dances to drama and philosophical discussion groups, have sprung up during the war in one industrial town. This re-emphasis on voluntary corporate action over a great range of human interests and activities is a return by a devious route to something for which the Christian Church has always stood. "Throughout its history," says the report, "the Christian Church has fostered the idea of community life on a basis of human fellowship."

It will be years before we see many of the ambitious ground plans printed in the concluding pages of the report translated into bricks and mortar. Meanwhile, the essential thing is to keep alive the tiny plants of the desire for a less atomised, more corporate living. The range and richness added to personal life by free association with others in some worth-while activity can only be guaged by experiencing it. If we can't have a community centre, let us have a house, a hut, a room whenever and wherever we possibly can.

The accompanying Supplement will, we hope, meet the desire of some News-Letter readers for accounts of local experiments. Mrs. Keable was for a short time on the staff of the Christian Frontier, and is now a secretary of the Town and Country Planning Association. She writes also as the wife of a parson in suburbia.

Yours sincerely,

Kathleen Bliss

[1] "Community Centres." H.M. Stationery Office, 9d.

COMMUNITY IN SUBURBIA

By GLADYS KEABLE

The war is a very ill wind indeed, but the little eddies of good which it blows around in unexpected quarters are surprising, and sometimes cheering. From time to time we see or hear of a brilliant use of the abnormal conditions of living imposed by the forces or war-time industry. But of all such manifestations of a revival of creative social living, the cynical may ask: What happens when there is no longer any necessity to congregate together? Do we then go back to keeping ourselves to ourselves? "

It may be of some interest, therefore, to hear of a few straws in this wind which show the way it is blowing, even in "civvy street." If any signs of spontaneous sociability are to be found in that last stronghold of isolationism, the London suburbs, that is surely a firm indication of the state of the weather.

CIVIL DEFENCE AND LOCAL COMMUNITY

There are such signs in the suburbs to-day, and it is largely the experiences of civil defence work which have brought them into being. In these "outer deserts," as elsewhere, both in town and country, gangs of volunteers were formed to carry out the many necessary tasks of defence: fireguards, W.V.S. housewives and salvage groups, home guards, wardens and "penny-a-weekers." "All these people have had an illuminating experience; they have made friends with their neighbours, they have come to understand some of the administrative problems of a district, or at least a street; they have worked with the clergy and with the local authorities, and they have learnt how much every individual can count when he is given a chance to do so. . . . Experience has shown them that the proper way of planning things is to secure the kind of structure which ensures that individuals and small groups in co-operation shall learn to control the material and the administrative adjustment of their own immediate surroundings, and so gain larger insights into, and control over, the wider world of affairs. Where are such small groups to meet after the war? What is to happen to the wardens' dart club or discussion group? What new forms of democratic association are to make a bridge between the single powerless individual and the borough official and council whose activities he took for granted, as outside his ken, before the war? Is the street or the ward or the neighbourhood to come more into its own as a conscious civic unit, as it has been in war time? Thus, . . . where before the semi-detached villa has been both the sign and often a large factor in a growing isolationism and disintegration of

society, the wardens' club or even the salvage centre has become the material symbol of a new communion of persons." [1]

WAR-TIME EXPERIENCE FOR PEACE-TIME LIVING—A LOCAL EXPERIMENT

Naturally, most people are still inarticulate about this experience; but it is both real and widespread, and can be brought to consciousness if it is focussed on some practical objectives.

The first step seems to be to agree on what feature of the place is in most obvious and urgent need of remedy, and to start from there. Where are we going to meet and keep in touch when our civil defence headquarters close down? That is a burning question in our own as in many districts. The normal suburb has no common meeting place to which its residents can go by right and in which we can find recreation which we cannot enjoy alone, or in our own space-restricted, vacuum-cleansed homes. There is perhaps the church hall, but this barn-like structure contains but one room; so that, even if there are no restrictions on its use, it is not much for a district of 12,000 people. Before the war, this complete absence of facilities for meeting and interchange of interests did not worry us, for we felt no need of them. Now that we do, we begin to realize forcibly how amorphous is the physical and social structure of our neighbourhood.

Clearly our primary need is a physical meeting-place before we can think of anything high flown like culture or civic pride and responsibility, but how do we discover which of our fellow residents are like-minded with us? Of course there is the local press, but "local" for us means serving a population of 200,000, so it is not a very good means for personal contact; one needs to have an idea fairly well shaped before putting it in print. We might, you would think, put a notice in the public library; but although I do not live in an outlying part of the district, it takes me an hour and costs me 6d. to get to my nearest public library and back. What about the town hall? In spite of our 200,000 population we are only an urban district, and do not boast a civic centre. To get to my council offices and back would cost me 10d., and I cannot tell you how long it would take, for I have never had occasion to venture into those outer regions.

It is by now fairly clear to us that this kind of district is so entirely featureless that it is impossible to ask any normal resident to start taking an intelligent interest in the place as a whole. Add to this, a great number of us mostly see it in the dark. The only way for us to gain any effective insight into its needs and possibilities is to take it piece by piece, and we decide to start on our own ward.

[1] *The Church and the Planning of Britain.* S.P.C.K., 2s.

We will call a meeting in the church hall, when we can get it for an evening. Who shall call it? There is no single person who is known to more than a fraction of the residents, still less one who might be recognized as a natural leader for the district. So we send round a letter, with half a dozen signatures, representing the civil defence services, the church, the school and our ward councillors of opposite political colours. To whom do we send it? There turns out to be no directory, so we have to rely entirely on personal knowledge to see that we send word to every organization and to those individuals we think might be interested. In this we are greatly helped by the clergy, who know far more than anybody else about people and their interests.

I stress these difficulties deliberately in order to drive home the important fact that the proverbial attitude of the suburban resident of "keeping oneself to oneself" has well-defined causes, some of which are physical and environmental. Many a provincial alderman, thrice-mayor-of-his-city, could rapidly lose his civic sense if he lived in these conditions. We have taken the complementary assumptions too much for granted: first that there is no hope of stirring the civic apathy of those who live on the fringes of big cities, and secondly that big towns must just go on growing because it is beyond our power to stop them or to give them coherent shape. We need now to wrestle with both these giants (but it is really one double-headed monster) at the same time, if we are to strengthen the genuine feeling after neighbourliness and after a place of one's own to help run and to be proud of; a feeling of which there is much scattered evidence all round London at present, and which is finding expression in the formation of civic associations, residents' associations, town planning groups and the like, from Middlesex to Kent and from Hertfordshire to Surrey. The example I have given is by no means an isolated one.

In spite of pessimists, our meeting turned out reasonably well, and since then we have taken several months hammering an Association into shape. The civil defence committee is convinced now that it has found its peace-time job here. Instead of degenerating into an "old boys' club" wistfully looking back to the good old days of what we did in the great war, it is going to use its experience of neighbourhood organization for constructive civic purposes. A week or two ago we did a surprising thing, which ten or even five years ago would hardly have seemed possible. Six of the committee, all independent business men, went to see the modest community centre of a neighbouring L.C.C. housing estate. Now community centres have normally been thought of as places established for the poor (THEM) by social service (US), but we were interested and impressed by the indications of a rich and varied social life going on in the place and came to the conclusion that this is the kind of thing which

we want to establish for ourselves, paying our own piper and calling our own tune. The other strong feeling that we have, which runs through all the discussion, is that this is not only, or even primarily, for ourselves, but it is something we can do to prepare for the home-coming of the men and women in the Forces.

Many may think this is a song of sixpence about a ha'porth of news, but one hears of a new activity of this kind in some part of the country every few weeks. Such groups will certainly not often produce spectacular results, for the difficulties in London anyhow, can hardly be over-estimated. There is a group, for instance, at the next station to ours on the tube, and the first three months' work they had there was to establish some sort of identity for themselves. Twenty years ago the place was a beautiful country village of less than a thousand inhabitants. To-day it houses 65,000 people in a district about 2½ miles square. It is in a borough of one name, a parliamentary constituency of another, a police sub-division of another, and yet another postal area. The incoming families are from every part of England, strangers to each other, and there is not a single public hall. What sense of place can grow up naturally in these conditions? Yet surprisingly there is such a sense, and for a most happy reason; for the parish church there has a widespread influence, and it is a witness to the power of the living Christ to join together those whom semi-detachment has put asunder.

This example points the way in which Christians could and surely should help to bring these new strivings after a fuller life to birth. The Christian Church is one of the few bodies left, as the C.N-L. constantly points out, which deals with people of all sorts and kinds without classifying them by age, sex, occupation, class or in any other way, and which attempts to make them go along together. Here is a chance for Christians to show their concern for fellow citizens without the attendant suspicion that they are baiting the hook. This stirring of the dormant civic consciousness is not a new way of filling the empty pew, but an opportunity for the fulfilment of our temporal Christian duty of redeeming our own time, and in a very intimate sense "our own place."

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